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ABSTRACT

While faculty may believe that the purpose of a college education is to pass information on, teach social skills, and improve the individual and society, there can be a clash of ideals when speaking about education to 18- to 29-year old Generation X students. Rather than viewing college as a door to the world of ideas, these students more often want to major in nursing or computer science to be able to find a job. This generation is also more likely to be peer dominated, since the trend toward single parents or two working parents has meant that they started group experiences in day care at early ages and have few older role models. They often have different expectations than teachers, as well, with a 1989 study finding that 75 percent of college students cited being very well off financial as their goal and 72 percent hoping to make more money. These students concern for security is also evidenced in the fact only 1 in 25 major in Liberal Arts. To reach out to Generation X students, Liberal Arts teachers should show how assignments reflect skills needed in the "real world," such as critical thinking and problem solving. In addition, incorporating service learning components can provide students with a sense of community. Contains 11 references. (BCY)

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Generational Clash in the Academy: Whose Culture Is It Anyway?

Mid-Career Fellowship Program
Princeton University

Written By

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June 1996

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Issues of Education at Community Colleges: Essays by Fellows in the Mid-Career Fellowship Program at Princeton University

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Pat Kalata

History 530

Generational clash in the Academy: Whose culture is it anyway.

"Knowledge and ignorance are questions of degree, of territory, not matters of absoluteness" (Diller, 141).

The current crop of college students has a culture of its own, as any generation does. They have cultural icons and skills we never dreamed of. For them there was no life before television and the internet. They have yet to experience a major watershed event, such as a war or major politican tragedy. They see education differently than prior generations. The question is then: How can we make connections between their culture and the culture we, as college instructors, value and would like to see them adopt? The beginning lies in understanding more about this group: their experiences and their expectations as they relate to this group's time in college. When discussing current college students, I am aware that many of our students are older, returning adults but they are seldom included when college faculty share tales of woe and inadequate preparation, motivation and academic ability. The students under discussion in this paper are those identified as members of Generation X, also called the 13rd generation, or the Sesame Street generation: the age group between 18 and 29. These are the people who fill the bulk of seats in college classrooms and, as such, are the very people college administrators and faculty seek to understand. It is to these people that we teachers attempt to impart the wisdom of the ages, despite their resistance. Oftentimes, we feel like the proverbial mother: "Take this; it's good for you." "You'll be a better person someday for having had this experience." or "This hurts me more than it does you."

We like to believe that, when we were young, we valued a college education as the door to the world of ideas, nothing more or less. Unlike the students of today, we were interested only in the purity of knowledge and intellectual discourse. The college teachers of today were the college students of the 1950's and 1960's. During those decades, many children of working class families seized the opportunity to attend college because they, and their families, saw college as the way to attain better and more secure employment. At that time, the creation of community colleges and national prosperity combined to fuel the upsurge in first generation college attendants. College, in the eyes of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, the eyes of people who had lived through the Great Depression and a world war, was a means to the very clear end of greater security. And, in some part of our minds, we agreed, even while eager to pursue knowledge in a well loved field.

How different was that experience from the decision of today's students who want to major in nursing or computer science so that they'll be able to find a job. Yes, there are differences - real differences - but too often we, as college teachers, face our students with dismay. We see their lack of knowledge and interest in general culture as a spreading virus corrupting civilization and putting the future of the planet in jealousy. We share horror tales of reluctant, unprepared, self-absorbed students who cause individual and collective difficulty for us. But how did they get that way? And what does their presence mean for higher education and society at large? Are we really facing classes of "half adults" as Robert Bly identifies them? (8-13) Or is this generational change just one more reflection of national evolution?

When I refer to culture in this paper, I am speaking of more than the fine arts and literature that form the common foundation of many of our existences. In the case of generations prior to this current one, that

foundation has been fairly stable for a long time. The canon of literature was cast in granite and the hierarchy of every social institution was entrenched. Recently, Bloom, Hirsch, and others have advocated the return to a traditional standard as the necessary foundation of true learning and culture. These authors provide lists of names, dates, and works of art the knowledge of which they maintain is the measure of successful education. Currently, many students are unfamiliar and uninterested in this general culture.In this new generation, the cultural foundation is made of quicksand that underlies a shifting landscape. Everything in the world of our students moves faster than we are accustomed to. People today are being hit by more messages than anyone could attend to. Attention spans are shorter and it is more difficult to maintain focus on any subject for any period of time beyond the length of a sound bite. The proof of this is in the world of popular culture. Rock bands become popular and make millions, only to disappear as quickly. Television shows rise and fall in popularity in one season. Everything new is quickly embraced and quickly discarded. The only thing constant is change. It is hard to environ any contemporary singer or group having the lasting devotion afforded a Frank Sinatra or Elvis Presley. The foundations of higher education have suffered along with the rest of society. Change is around each corner and often, the very people we despair of are demanding that we prove our message worthy before they pay attention.

Background

These young people are very different from the generations before them, first of all, because their experience of family life and community has been radically different from any preceding generation. Never before have so many children grown up with working mothers. In 1985, Holtz reported that the percentage of children whose mothers (in two parent families) worked was

68% for ages 6-17 and 53% for those under the age of 6. These percentages continue to increase. At the same time, nucleus families are living away from relatives capable of providing support and haven for family members.

In addition, the rate of divorce increased dramatically over the span of the last few decades. Households headed by single parents, usually the mother, became more of a norm. "Divorce hit a high in 1980 with 226 per 10,000 women fifteen years and older and leveled out at 208 per 10,000 women in 1987 (Ritchie, 40). Now, with remarriages, blended families require children as well as new marriage partners to adjust to new family members. Quasi siblings show up on alternate weekends and for a few weeks in the summer. Rooms are kept ready for them and the household adapts to their needs and wants on a regular basis. Even the definition of a family has changed with 71% of Generation X agreeing that a family is any two or more people who love and take care of each other. For 70%, a family is a single mother and a child and 46% believe that a gay or lesbian couple with children is a family (Ritchie, 43).

These changes also extent to the economical situation in the household. For a while, divorce was the chief culprit as women were forced to down scale their standard of living. Now, the economy is changing rapidly as companies merge and downsize. Parents of both genders suffer. If the marriage is intact, one or both may find themselves unemployed or underemployed. The secure home life children expected may disappear or change, often on a regular basis. The fathers who held onto jobs they hated for the sake of paying a mortgage and sending children to college are suddenly sitting home. Many couples determined to keep ahead of the economy with duel employment, or multiple jobs for each. The rate of inflation makes two incomes necessary for a household to maintain the standard of living as one income during the 1950's.

For these reasons, many more of these children started their group experience at early ages and many, because of family financial limits, were placed in inadequate care . While a mother may not be the only person able to supervise a young child, there seems to be evidence that the lack of a permanent caretaker has poor results. "Children who entered low quality child care as infants had the most difficulty with peers as preschoolers." (Holtz, p. 46). These children start school being easily distracted, less task-oriented and more hostile. more importantly, young children also were increasingly cast in terms of only their own peer group, taking their social cues from same age children. They have few older role models as their interaction with adults and older children was limited. Even the relationship with their own parents was often confined to a few minutes a day. Parents, feeling guilty for lack of time with their children, tried to make up for it in various ways, often with material gifts and privileges these parents did not have in their own youth.

This peer dominated life only increased as this group entered formal schooling. As these children grew, they became latchkey children. This often meant that children as young as seven years arrived home to an empty house, a phone call from mom, written instructions and the television waiting to keep them company. One inner city teacher I know complains of the obesity of her third grade students; they are instructed by their parents to go home and lock the door so they spend their afternoons snacking and watching cartoons. The neighborhood streets are too unsafe for them so there is no playing and roughhousing in the fresh air for them. They are not unique. Many children watch long hours of television alone or with friends instead of with older family members. While 50% of fifth graders were reporting less than four minutes a day reading, they were watching television 130 minutes every day (Bly,11).

This is the first generation that has grown up with television's constant presence in the home and the rapid onslaught of other media. They surf the net and channels by the hundreds. Their attention span is short but capable of attending to multiple input without suffering sensory overload. In fact, they prefer it that way. If you ask a college student how much television he watched in a day, he may claim little or none. If you ask how many hours the television is on in his home, you get a very different response. One student told me, "Oh, I guess twenty hours."

"There is an information overload. There are too many cable channels. Too many crises from all over the world are being featured on their local channels. There are too many authorities with competing clashing claims." (Loeb 36) This generation has absented itself from the real conflicts presented on television, partly because of this overload factor.

While Generation X is truly concerned about real life violence, they are much more inured to violence in the media (Ritchie, 100). They look to other sources for a less complex, less serious version of the world. Tabloid TV rating for this group is steadily increasing with 3.1% of 18-34 year olds regularly viewing Current Affair, 3.2 watching Hard Copy. 2.8 watching Inside Edition and 1.9 watching Nightline (Ritchie, 106). Countless college students watch talk shows. The power of MTV in the last presidential campaign with its "Choose or Lost" campaign is forcing politicians to reformulate their own media presentations to accommodate Generation X's preferred style (Solomon,20). When I asked a Journalism class to prepare a questionnaire that would not be understood by people over thirty, three of the fifteen questions were directly concerned with MTV; ten other ones were concerned with rock singers and groups. (Appendix A) When one student saw the questionnaire, he commented, "We spend way too much time with MTV."

MTV and other quick moving and energetic media promote new cultural icons for this group. "Madonna's appeal was both honest and naughty; she symbolized for Xers both a victory over the system and a parody of their parents in the 1980's" (Ritchie, 104). She became a cultural hero for many young people who frankly admire her ability to manipulate cultural norms. Popular figures like Madonna endure as long as they continue to come up with new and more outrageous stunts. Being boring, even for a moment, has become the worst sin, a swift ticket out of the limelight.

Television became this generation's standard for reality. On television, most people are middle class or wealthy. The poor only exist as criminals or as victims who need outside assistance to battle a heartless system. Solutions are always found in timely fashion. Life on television is never subjected to long stretches of boredom. These children have grown into young adults believing that life should always be interesting and solutions always possible.

Generation X members do not see themselves as part of a community and accountable to it. Their community on television changes all the time. Their addresses may change frequently. Their close friends may be few in number and they may have only one parent, usually working too many hours, available. And often these young people are reluctant to bother a parent whom they view as already "stressed to the max". They learned to take responsibility only for themselves and like it that way. Their relationship with authority figures is not grounded in respect or fear.

"Most of them had led peer-centered existences for years before arriving at college. In their public high schools and in their homes and families, they had become masters at avoiding the close scurvily of adults, or at manipulating adult authority when they could not avoid it. Incoming [college]

freshmen women and men also typically said that their parents had voluntarily given them more freedom - later nighttime curfews, fewer questions about their private behavior" (Moffatt, 34).

Furthermore, throughout their school experience, they have found academic standards slipping. Penalties were rarely exacted in elementary and high school for incomplete assignments or for minimum completion of assignments. Self-esteem took on great importance in classroom functioning. Tracking in high schools limited the heavy academic courses to the top ten or fifteen percent of the student body. Few students were placed in vocational education. The majority of students(47%) were placed in general education tracks. Teachers in elementary schools as well as high schools complain about the lowering of requirements and the lack of parental support and presence in the schools. Both the SATs and GREs have slipped. The average SATs Math score in 1967 was 491, and in 1993, 478. The Verbal in 1967 was 467 and in 1993, 424.

Secondary education begun to fall short of traditional strict requirements that were seen as preventing independent thinking. "For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents" (Littman, 98). Students, parents and professionals agree that high school was too easy. The National Commission on Excellence in Education called American high school education "a tide of mediocrity "; It blamed "a smorgasbord" of easy electives that have replaced traditional academic courses. "Students in all tracks,even college preparatory, were spending less time on English, math, language, and other academic courses and more time on remedial and physical education and "personal service and development" courses, such as budgeting, band, chorus, and typing." (Littwin, 42-43)

Is training for teaching and the general low regard for teachers contributing to the problem? Many education majors admit to not liking reading and only course required material. Currently, those students majoring in education are to be found in the bottom third of their class. As the respect for teachers and support for education continues to decrease, there is no indication that this situation will improve.

Experience

More high school graduates are choosing college (57.9% in 1989). However, at the same time, many of them are active employees. In 1969, 43 percent of all college students worked outside jobs. By 1990, it was 63 percent. It certainly has increased. Many of these students are full time employees. At the same time, they insist on taking a full course load. Conflicts over their use of time naturally occur. One student, when I expressed concern over his absences, replied, "I'm paying my own way. I have three jobs. If they call me to come in and I don't, I can lose my job. I can always catch up here." But catching up and staying ahead can be difficult or even impossible.

"During the 1970's and 1980's, older, nontraditional students fueled the growth of community colleges, but during the early 1990's, significant numbers of 18 to 24 year olds who ultimately want to receive a baccalaureate degree are spending the first two years at lower cost institutions and living at home. The recession of the early 1990's played a significant role in college enrollment. According to the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, the number of first-year students who chose colleges because of low tuition or financial aid or in order live near home reached a record high in 1991. Over one fourth of the students surveyed selected colleges in order to live near

home, while over 7% said they were attending college because they could not find jobs" (Sidel, 38).

The resulting changes in student attitudes and values include a greater interest in material and power goals, coupled with decreased social concern and altruism and a greater support for student autonomy and for reduced institutional control over the lives and life choices of students. (Astin, 26)

They are at once more flexible and less idealistic than the preceding generations. "Student resignation both results from and furthers a more general erosion of American political life. Students say they are afraid to act, don't know how, and fear the consequences of even thinking about the urgent issues of their time" (Loeb, 25). They are more multicultural than their parents. Some have learned prejudice in their homes but they also have learned what is not acceptable in the public spheres of their lives. "Many Xers understand the hard-won access to racial and sexual equality as a given. In most cases, their environment was racially diverse from childhood. Most Xers did not have to grapple with the struggle for integration" (Ritchie, 57). They may believe that battles are already won or there is no point in fighting on.

Expectations

"By the mid-eighties, national surveys of high school seniors found that 90% expected things to get better for themselves, but only 47% of young men and 34% of young women believed the situation in the country as a whole would improve. The split in expectations leads them to prepare themselves for sale to the highest bidder, while keeping larger ideals blurred in the remote closets of their souls. Whatever troubles might come, they hope to ride them out through skills, persistence, and hard work." (Loeb, 18) College is seen as the arena of preparation.

The current crop of students is more interested in jobs than in the life of the mind. 75% of current college freshmen (1989) give as their goal in attending college to be very well off financially. 72% hope to make more money by attending college. Only 41% chose the opportunity to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. In 1970, 80% of all freshmen ranked this last choice as very important. (Holtz, 128) When I asked students about the same list of reasons for attending college, 80% said they were there to get a better job. Almost 100% were enrolled to be able to make more money. 20% expected to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. However, over half of the small sample I polled (twenty five Composition students) wanted to do at least one of the following: Gain a better appreciation of ideas, gain more culture and learn about interesting things. I recently asked the students in a Journalism class why they were in college and gave them two options: to get a good job or to learn more about critical thinking and moral values. When I mentioned the last two options, the students hooted good naturedly. The day before, a student in the same class, after excitedly telling me about everything he was learning and doing in an internship at a local paper. said "I don't know whether I want to work on a newspaper; reporters don't make all that much." These responses are consistent with those of students surveyed in 1988 by the American Council on Education.

The concern for security in the future is reflected in their choice of majors with only one student in twenty-five majoring in Liberal arts and two undecided. The others' choices were grouped in business with accounting leading, communication, computer science and information systems, nursing, physical therapy, criminal justice, education, construction management and graphic arts. Many of these programs have associate degrees available and others can be either terminal associate degrees or transfer programs. These

students seem to be preparing if employment is needed or available at any future stage. Required Liberal Arts courses only get in the way of this goal.

Currently, in four year colleges, the major most preferred by students across the country is business with foreign languages as the least preferred. "A few [students] found genuine delight in the gamesmanship of finance or sales. Yet most flocked to these careers not from intrinsic interest, but from their sense that comfort and security superseded all other goals" (Loeb, 54). Even though the business world has suffered massive layoffs, it is still seemed as the logical arena for achieving success. Other majors have appeal because they offer opportunity for security. Nursing has become popular because many students believe that health care providers are always needed, despite the reality that hospitals, like other businesses, are cutting back on their staffs. At Rutgers, the economics program enrolls 32% of all students The top ten majors listed at Rutgers were Economics, English, Psychology, Political Science, Biological Science, Communications, History, Computer Science, Mathematics, and Accounting.

However, even while students enroll in majors that they hope will provide some kind of job security, they seem to resent professors' efforts to expanse their minds. They want the grades they believe that they are entitled to by virtue of enrolling in the class. "They wanted to be graded...not because they considered grades a legitimate measure of achievement, but because they viewed them as pragmatically necessary - a way to prove they could fit into the requisite slots" (Loeb, 97). They have come by these expectations honestly. Their past experiences have taught them that showing up guarantees a passing grade. Therefore, doing anything more should merit an above average grade.

The liberal arts suffer most from the emphasis on employability. Because subjects are only as important as their relationship to the job market,

literature and history are viewed as frills appropriate for a few elite students. As a consequence, it is often more difficult to strike a spark in the liberal arts classroom. Students come prepared with a certain detachment. Few technical or business programs leave much room for electives and many programs have long lists of suggested options. The tight curriculum for these majors and outside jobs also lead to a narrow focus so that many of these students don't take advantage of cultural activities offered on the campus.

Yet, even as they strive for the academic key to good paying jobs, contemporary students know that their prospects are continually being limited by circumstances over which they have no control. They have caught glimpses of the good life but see it as fading gradually into the distance. In many cases, they are already coping with the decline in the job market. In 1970, there were two jobs for every college graduate. In 1993, there was one job for every 1.6 graduates. The 1996 graduating class from the University of Pennsylvania is one third employed. And, as one unemployed banking executive maintains, "Now these graduates are competing with their parents for available positions." America's economic crunch makes it hard for students to take responsibility for more than just personal survival. "Compared to twenty years ago, they work more hours at outside jobs, graduate more in debt, and face more uncertain economic futures. They have fewer choices of what to take and fewer resources to finance their learning" (Loeb, 44).

Frequently, these are the students seen as operating academically in a detached way, wanting the respect afforded mature members of society by virtue of their long work records, while placing the responsibility for their education solely on teachers. This is partly due to the message they believe that they have received from society. "The recent American individualistic self.. is a "Privatized" self, an inward psychological entity of personal beliefs,

values and feelings." (Moffatt, 41) Littman adds, "The total picture seems to be one of blissful self-centeredness, of young adults who are indifferent to not only politics and political institutions, but to society as a whole. They appear to have no sense of any community larger than their own households." (232) And, since their community is so limited, they feel no obligation to society.

Conclusion

We may believe that the purpose of an university education is to pass on information, teach social skills and improve the individual as well as help society. However, there is a clash of ideals when speaking about education to Generation X. Our students see a world of uncertainty. We are asking them to be interested in issues without perceived purpose or over which they have no control.

What can be done? Maybe, we need to start with their real concerns. Assignments can be shown to reflect the skills needed in the "real world" across a range of occupations . Skills like analysis, problem solving, working to a deadline, coordination, adaption to new situations, making judgments with inadequate data and even the educated prediction of trends and developments in technology and the economy are needed in the future. These skills can be honed to perfection in liberal arts courses. Since there is no way for college to stay ahead of the market without the constant shifting of emphasis and funds, we need to reexamine ways of promoting skills, like critical thinking, that students need in a changing world in all areas of the curriculum. More and more, we need to go back to the community at large and help our students to connect to the rest of the world in meaningful ways. This means both sending students into the community with class assignments and bringing the community to the classroom with citizens from all fields participating in

college life. "By giving the school system exclusive control over education, reforms encouraged a division of cultural labor that would weaken the people's capacity to educate themselves... The teaching functions would be concentrated in a class of professional specialists, whereas it ought to be diffused throughout the whole community. An educational establishment was just as dangerous as a priestly or military establishment" (Lasch 66). Moving education into the community could remove this separation and as other citizens see the colleges in operation, increase respect for higher education. A required or optional service learning component in many courses may produce more concerned and active citizens willing to take part in government and civil affairs at every level. We need to assist students to develop[both a private self and a public self. Then, we may be able to instill in the private self a real commitment to the public needs.

Finally it may be time that we reflect on our own journeys to our present positions. In our introduction to the general culture and its values, what steps did we take and who provided the signposts for us? Maybe, we need to take ourselves and our fields both more and less seriously in order to see our areas as part of the whole. We need to reaffirm to ourselves and our students the wonder and beauty of learning, to trumpet our love of learning, to use contemporary culture to connect to traditional culture and to expect miracles. "The university not withstanding its present disarray, is a "sacred institution" and teachers can set an example for others if they approach their calling in a spirit of reverence. The office of the devoted teacher is not to deify or even defend a "dying culture" but to resist the "downward identification" that threatens any form of culture at all." (Lasch, 221). For whatever reason we chose college teaching as a vocation, we have this sacred trust.

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